

## A few fragments of Qurna history from Tarif

The Theban west bank, known as Qurna by those who live there, has been where archaeologists, antiquarians and collectors have lived and worked for centuries. They have excavated and recorded the details of tombs, temples – and occasionally houses – of people who lived many centuries earlier and whose lives they never knew, never experienced and never benefited from. Somehow the people and buildings of the living community were an irritant or unworthy of record. A shining exception is Zoltán Fábián whose work on the Bet Boghdady,<sup>1</sup> the house of the Boghdady family, is to my knowledge the first in depth, professional study of a house and, to a certain extent, the associated lives of the people he was living and working amongst. I feel honoured to be asked to contribute to this birthday present with another fragment of knowledge of the living community of Qurna – albeit those who live off ‘the mountain’ in Tarif.

Tarif is the area to the north of the road which runs along the Muslim cemetery, which is itself north of Seti I temple, and the area of the Nobles Tombs and those of Dra Abu al-Naga which housed the hillside communities. Tarif is part of the administrative district of Qurna. It is a large area of flattish land with a number of huge three sided *saff* tombs (tombs with a row of entrances) and hundreds of other tombs of various sizes.

Such tombs make excellent accommodation – free, good in all weathers, roomy, and with enough space for large or small family groups. The main *saffs* had big open courtyards, excellent for keeping animals, and even the smaller tombs had outside space. Building materials for interior conversions, furniture and household items – earth, sand, manure and water – were close by, and also free. The wonderful 1:1000 survey maps of Josef Dorner<sup>2</sup> show the variety and extent of the tombs. They also show the footprints of the ‘modern’ residences that were on site in 1971.

<sup>1</sup> Fábián, Z. I. 2011. Excavations at the southern slope of el-Khokha in the area of Theban Tomb 184 (Nefermenu) – 2010: a corner of Qurna. *Orpheus Noster* III (1), 5–26 (in Hungarian: a thébai el-Hoha domb déli lejtőjének feltárása Nefermenu TT 184 számú sziklasírjának körzetében – 2010. 1. rész: Qurna egy sarka.) English translation sent personally.

<sup>2</sup> Dorner, J. 1976. Plan der Nekropole. In Arnold, D. *Gräber des Alten und Mittleren Reiches in El-Tarif*. Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo. Mainz am Rhein, Verlag Phillip von Zabern.

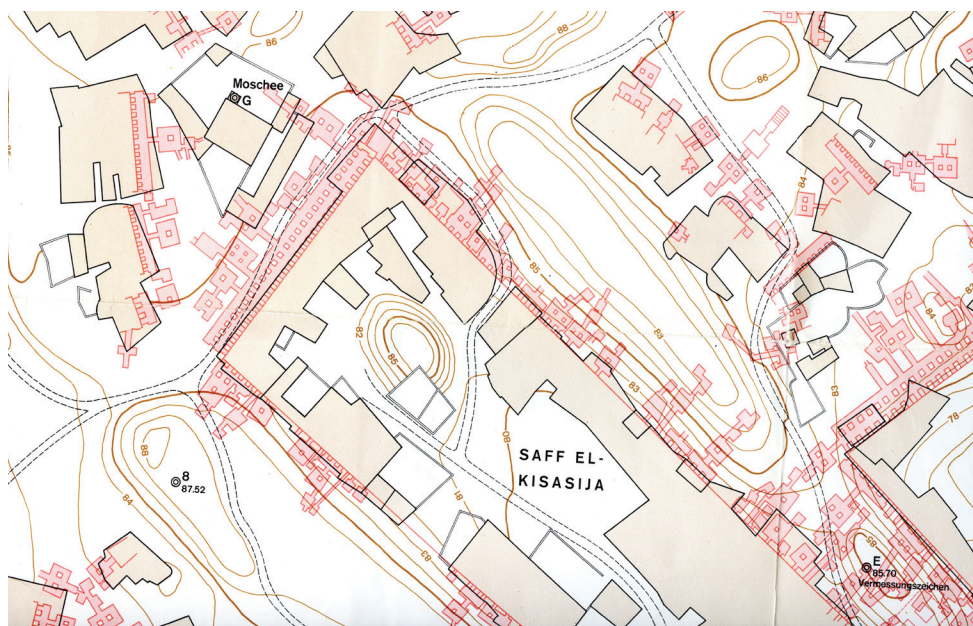


Figure 1. Saff el-Kisasija , a small portion of one of the two large survey maps by Josef Dörner, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo.

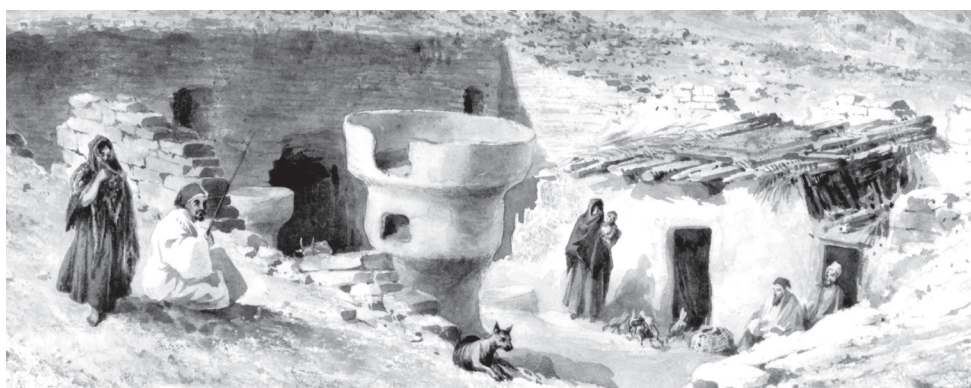


Figure 2. William Prinsep, Tombs at Kurna, Thebes, 1842 (part only).  
Courtesy of the Martyn Gregory Gallery. Private collection.

It is clear from the maps and from the photos in the same volume that there was already a sizeable community living there. Until quite recently many families still lived a very simple lifestyle, with perhaps a small mud-brick building outside the much-used tomb, and mud structures for storage and animals, as painted by Prinsep near the Nobles tombs in 1842.

Many families had, by 1971, built sizeable mud-brick houses and family complexes.

The huge three sided *saffs* with their rows of entrances looking like a low multi-columned palace, were once tombs of kings,<sup>3</sup> and, raised on a shelf above the river, with their large courts facing Karnak and open on the eastern side, would have been very visible from the river and especially to those using the main landing point just to the east of the Seti temple. They would have looked like wide open arms almost inviting the visitor in. It is therefore of no surprise that it was these tombs that many of the early European visitors saw first, and described and sketched in their notes and journals. I have argued elsewhere<sup>4</sup> that Denon's drawing and descriptions,<sup>5</sup> and the stories he tells of the French army's hostilities with the locals, are of Tarif.

Owing to the way in which they occupied the hillside, the Qurnawi houses and tombs of the Nobles area were very obvious to the casual viewer and visitor, unlike those of Tarif today. With their decorative interiors and promises of archaeological riches, the hillside tombs were also always more attractive to Egyptologists and archaeologists, as against the Tarif cemetery which only Arnold – and to a small extent Petrie – ever recorded. It is very lucky that Arnold and Dörner did their work then, as it would be impossible today. In 1994, a few years before I started hunting in archives for records of Qurnawi history, I first met a family who lives above a tomb in Tarif and for whom this was, and still is, just another useful part of their property in which they could store things and animals.

On consulting Dörner's map, this house is above a *saff* with 10 entrances. I knew nothing of Tarif history or the Intef cemetery, but I learnt then, to my surprise, that most of their neighbours also had tombs, and in later years I visited some other houses with tombs and took a few fairly random photos. Knowing that a move off the hillside was almost inevitable, I took thousands of photos to record houses, spaces and residents from Qurnat Marai on the south to Atiyaat on the north. I also tried to encourage professionals to collect the oral history before people moved, but no-one picked up the idea. Maybe this was because the whole subject of Qurna was too 'political' or perhaps it was just lack of interest. Now that the hillside communities have moved, and their houses demolished by

<sup>3</sup> Thomas, E. 1966. *The Royal Necropoleis of Thebes*. New Jersey, Princeton, Ch 1. 1 and Ch 2. 7-11.

<sup>4</sup> Simpson, C. 2003. Modern Qurna – pieces of an historical jigsaw. In N. Strudwick and J.H. Taylor (eds), *The Theban Necropolis: Past, Present and Future*, 244-249. London, British Museum, 245 and Plate 131.

<sup>5</sup> Denon, V. 1803. *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt*. Translated by A. Aitken. 3 vols. London, Printed for T. N. Longman, O. Rees, R. Phillips and T. Gillet.





Figure 3. Looking down from the back of the house into the courtyard which then housed some cows, 2012.

bulldozers – their intricate social and built histories wiped away – we are, however, left with a community which does still live above and beside their tombs, and whose older members remember the life of the family when they lived in them.

We are very lucky that Kees van der Spek did his historical-anthropological work in Qurna with fieldwork between 1997-99, which resulted in his wonderful book.<sup>6</sup> This is a record of the community who lived on the hillside at the Nobles, especially those of the Horubat area. He also gives us a very detailed analysis of the historical works which show some of the history of the then living communities. They have gone, but the still living, rapidly growing community of Tarif should now be a focus of research by those who are experienced in oral history collection as well as ethnographic fieldwork. The Tarif study should be a part of a wider oral history project to collect the histories, beliefs and practices of those

<sup>6</sup> Van der Spek, K. 2011. *The Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun*. Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press.



who lived on the hillside but have now mainly moved to the new settlements north. I have appealed for some years now for this work to be done; but in vain.<sup>7</sup> However, for this little article we made a small, and very amateur, start in Tarif.<sup>8</sup>

The *saff* tombs and the area around them are fast being heavily built over, the area is changing, concrete buildings replace mud ones almost overnight. If the photos in Plate 1, 2 and 14 in Arnold's 1976 report were to be re-taken today you would be hard pushed to recognise the areas. People used to live in the tombs and their courtyards themselves, and in the more recent past have built mud-brick houses 'upstairs' and now use the tombs for animals and storage. Many tombs hold collections of 'mud things' of various types, mainly unused these days and getting broken and damaged before being recorded. Many of the mud-brick houses are being replaced by taller, fired brick and concrete blocks, and naturally the *saff* tombs and courts are themselves being damaged and built over. There are reports of new houses collapsing into the tombs below where they have been built with no thought to the need for a solid foundation. It is known that people have been killed in this way.

A minor detail which has fascinated me ever since I read it in Denon's book is that the local people had resisted the French army and thrown stones at the soldiers, and they made General Belliard so angry that he blockaded one group of big tomb dwellings and mined them. The hawks and vultures who had been further north feeding on the results of other battles flocked to Tarif on hearing the explosion. I was told (maybe erroneously) many years ago that there is no *saff* in which the families of Atiyaat lived before their settlement on Dra; perhaps they were in the *saff* that was blown up. Very little has been written about just how brutal the French invasion actually was, but like all invading armies, they raped and pillaged. Perhaps there is still a record in the oral history of that army, and especially of the mining of a big tomb dwelling – perhaps another *saff*.

In April 2014, I conducted three interviews as a pilot for the possible larger oral history project to find out more about life in Tarif and especially in the *saffs*.<sup>9</sup> My assistant and translator was Mahmoud Hashash, whose family used to live in Horubat, and, incidentally, whose great grandfather was Mansour Al Hashash,

<sup>7</sup> Simpson, C. 2010. Qurna – More Pieces of an Unfinished History. In Z. Hawass and S. Ikram (eds), *Thebes and Beyond*. Cairo, Publications du Conseil Suprême des Antiquités de l'Égypte, 197-218.

<sup>8</sup> In April 2016, after the writing of this article, the Qurna History Project collaborated with the Archives and Rare Books Dept of the American University in Cairo and we recorded 75 interviews of elders who had lived in the hillside settlements.

<sup>9</sup> See note 8.

whose portrait was drawn by Bonomi in 1830.<sup>10</sup> Neither of us was experienced in oral history work, but I felt we could at least ‘make a start’. I had bought a small, unobtrusive tape-recorder, but we decided that this might intimidate people, and as we wanted them to be relaxed, we would ask questions and write down their answers. We agreed on a small set of questions but also agreed that our contacts should not be bombarded with questions but encouraged gently to talk, and if we had not got what we needed, then we could be more specific later. The questions were about life as they remembered it, and any family history and stories, work, animals, water, good and bad things, what they used and now use the tomb for, and any stories of local ‘spirits’.

As we have done only three interviews, it is impossible to make any generalisations about ‘life in the *saff*’ or Tarif generally, so what follows is the unedited transcriptions of the three interviews.

**Ahmed** is the father-in-law of a young man I have known since he was seven. I have only recently met Ahmed and his wife. They live in Southern Tarif with her mother (whose memory has sadly faded) and other children. Their tomb is not a *saff*; it is a large tomb with one entrance and a pillar, chambers to both sides,

four chambers from front to back. They ‘built’ mud-brick rooms inside the front part. The tomb is in the back yard of their present house.



Figure 4. Entrance to Ahmed's *bab el-haggar*, 2014.

## Ahmed's story

I was born here in the *bab el-haggar* (tomb house). There were two boys and three girls in the family. My father was from here, and my mother was from just north of here.

Life here was not sweet. It is sort of better now, but life is a heavy burden now. It was better than now. It was hard but we enjoyed it.

My family had no land – we took life day by day. We had a cow, and goats but not sheep. I used to get grass from the

<sup>10</sup> See Simpson 2010, 199, 212 especially Fig.1.

fields for the animals. I had a short time at school, but then stopped. I started to learn to carve scarabs and things. There were only two sons, so there were not many tasks to do. We had no land – my father did his best to look after us.

When I was 15 I started to learn how to carve stones and scarabs.

Then I got married.

When my grandfather and mother died I was about three years old. My father was born in 1920. He was 92 when he died two years ago.

It was something to do with the diet, pure food, vegetables from the fields. People then lived a long time.

*Did you get water from Bir Sheikh Taia?*

There was another *bir* (well) near here, Sheikha Ajura. And there is another *bir* near Saff el-Dawaba

There are two tombs, they both belonged to my father, and my grandfather. The wall on the outside and the steps were made about 50 years ago. The wall between the two tombs was made 150 years ago or more. There is one shaft. (*There is also an entrance just to the north, which is at a lower depth.*)

My mother and father had a bed... a *mastaba* in the first main chamber on the left. Me and my brother and sisters had another chamber to one side.

My mother had a *forn* (oven)<sup>11</sup> outside.

(*Of the mud structures on the wall*)... one was a lamp, and the other was for food. The tomb is used for storage, and the animals – goats and sheep and geese and ducks, etc.

The mud brick ‘house’ inside the tomb is only 50 years old.

I was born in 1968, and the inside house was already built by my father. My grandfather built the innermost one.

The modern house was built about 40 years ago. I helped them make the mud-bricks. My mother was happy when we moved to the outside house.

The *menama*<sup>12</sup> (*a multi-purpose bed/cupboard/child’s playpen/chicken coop made of a fermented mud, straw and dung mixture*) has gone, it was broken about 20 years ago.

**Kamel** is a craftsman who I have known for about 18 years. I visited the family many years ago when he lived in a mud-brick house on the site and took some photos of the family and the tomb interior.

<sup>11</sup> Simpson, C. 2008. *Earth Structures of Qurna* exhibition panels on <http://www.qurna.org/links.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Simpson, C. 2008. *Earth Structures of Qurna* exhibition panels on <http://www.qurna.org/links.html>.





*Figure 5. Earthen 'cupboards' in Kamel's tomb, 1999.*



*Figure 6. Entrance to Kamel's bab el-haggar, 2014.*



*Figure 7. Looking down into Kamel's saff courtyard, 2014.*

He lives in a part of Saff el-Kisasiye. The tomb entrance off the *saff* courtyard is at a very much lower level than the current house.

There are two levels of mud-brick buildings between the house and the *saff* with narrow steps on the north side of the vertical.

## Kamel's story

We lived in the *saff*, in the tomb house first. About 100 years ago the family started to build the mud houses in the courtyard outside. They didn't divide the inside of the tomb with earthen walls. About 60 years ago they started to build with mud-bricks. More recently we have built with concrete. Where the present concrete house is, there was a mud-brick house before, and five years ago I rebuilt it in concrete.

My son Mohamed lives in the first house and the court. Everyone else lives above.

Life before? When I was small, life was bitter.

I would wake up, then go out to the fields, work all day, we only had sheep and one *galabeya* (*male dress-like garment*).

It was a hard life, but a sweet one. When my mother made *molukheya* (*soup made of the vegetable Jew's mallow*), she made a very big one and there was lots left and we shared it. People shared. It was a good life – people don't share anything now.

My father worked in the fields with a cow and a buffalo and other animals. The women did the milking of the cow and buffalo, and cooked for us. If one of us had to go somewhere he would borrow a brother's *galabeya* – we only had one decent one between us.

Everybody ate together – even if it was only a little piece of bread we shared it.

Even better, we shared the house. In summer we all shared the tomb and in winter shared a blanket we made ourselves from sheep's wool. In each home we spun the wool – and then we took it to a man who lived near to weave it. An animal skin was used as a mat, or a cushion on a donkey – especially the skin of the goat. And we used animal skins for storing water as in the desert. The *saqieh* (*water wheel*) were on the plain and also *shadufs* (*counterpoised sweep for raising irrigation water*). We got our water at Bir Kisasiye.

It (*the Saff el-Kisasiye*) is for the tribe that specialises in tracing footsteps in the desert. There are many different stories – and they specialised in tracing the footsteps of animals.

Kisasiye means in fighting, 'to chop off' – violent in battle.



There were different families who lived as one family.  
Some were already here, and some came – people related through their mother or father.

*Any stories about the French?*

The French came first and made a port by Armant.

Some few people were in the army when Farouk was here. One man was in the British army for 12 years.

*(He has no stories about 'bad spirits'.)*

But there were no lights, so felt a little...

Bab el-Arusa – the tomb of the bride – a few steps from Bir Sheikh Taia. It's not there now as they widened the road there for Opera Aida, but till now I do not feel comfortable passing there.

If we went for a party in the south part of the village – Atiyaat or Ghabat – Sheikh Abul Qumsan was not there yet, so I had to pass through the cemetery and I felt that there was a group of people saying, 'Go back!' I went through while saying the Quran and then I felt very tall and big as a mosque. (*Kamel is quite short.*) After that I asked a wise man about this, and he said that there were three



Figure 8. Tomb entrance of Hajj Mohamed's neighbour, 2014



types of character, one is people who don't fear the spirits but talk to them, and the second are scared of their own shadow, and the third is the one that feels strange but did not see it ... not scared but don't really admit it is there.

*(Removing from saffs to hill.)*

People did move to the hill about 100 years ago, even 60 years ago.

I have heard that 200 years ago people moved to Horubat from here.

*Are there any stories about a saff that is not here any more?*

No.

*Anything else you would like to say?*

In the old days there was no electricity so people spent life inside. Now there is water and fans and drainage systems – the odour inside is not as good as it used to be.

It was like a paradise before. Now it is like a lack of oxygen there.

**Hajj Mohamed** was born in 1930. He is a stone dealer. I had not met him before the interview – he was a contact of Mahmoud's. His tomb is completely blocked off, unlike the one next door which I took photos of over the fence.

## Hajj Mohamed's story

I lived in a *bab el-haggar*, in the *saff* of the sons of Said. There were five doors. The tomb inside was not for the animals, just for us. The *hosh* (outer courtyard) had the camel, cow, donkey and buffalo. There was a little room for sheep and goats outside.

We grew cotton, and sesame and maize.

There were no houses at all when I was small. I was over 20 when the first houses were built. There were no houses at all, only the *bab el-haggar* and the *hosh*.

*(Tea was brought in for us, with sugar in a bowl.)* We used to use it from a block of sugar – we mixed it in the pot. The sugar was imported. There was only one person who grew sugar cane.

The maize – we used to have a different maize in the summer time.

We had never seen a guinea. We worked all day for one and a half piastres. A hundred days for one pound and 50 piastres. In one week, seven and a half piastres.

*Any stories of spirits?*

There were few people. To cross the cemetery you needed someone to cross with, out of fear... of ghosts and criminals.

I had a cow, but the mother of my uncle took the cow to work the *saqieh*. I went to get the cow at sunset. There is a stone in the cemetery... it appeared like a cat that started. When I knew it was a ghost I recited the most important verses of the Quran and started to cross the cemetery. I crossed and saw a man digging and making a small pile – I was scared of him – but I carried on until I reached home. Then fear took over me and I started shaking. They brought me a Sheikh and he told me it was a ghost. I said how was it a ghost when there was rubble? The Sheikh said: go and look in the morning. I looked, and there was no rubble. It had been a ghost.

I built the house about 50 years ago. When the big flood occurred at the time of Farouk, it went into all the *bab el-haggar*.

Once King Farouk came. He had his own royal car. There was a man called Abdel Bassett who kept pigeons. Farouk had a gun and started shooting lots of his pigeons. Farouk called for him and asked 'Why don't you stop me?' Abdel Bassett said, 'You are the king, how can I stop you?' Farouk said, 'OK. You make a wish.' He said that he wanted a bridge over the canal, and a gun to kill the birds that killed his pigeons. A few weeks later people came to build a wooden bridge. It was on the south side of Abu Shau (*a bridge that is over the canal*).

*(Had he ever heard of a vanished saff family?)*

No, but in 1942 there was bad malaria. There were nine in the family and only me and my sister survived. Some families were completely wiped out.

*(He had no stories about the French or a vanished saff.)*

*Were there any good things about the past?*

It was a life of hardship. We were bandaged. The sort of bread then... Now it is ten times better... you wouldn't give that to a dog now.

There was no money... but why do you need money?... you could buy a cow, or a piece of land.

The *bir* we used was Bir Bet Murad – opposite the house, near Kisasiye.

There was a *bir* behind the grocery shop near Abu Shau. There were three wells not far away.

It was the women's job to get the water. Some women stayed working at home, but some worked and helped the man in the field. It was a very hard life. You worked all day and never stopped.

Only women went to the well, about ten or more.

*Did young men harass them?*

No there was no harassment... some families... someone would kill them. No, there was no harassment – not like today.

*Why is it called Tarif? (I explained that Tarif was the place that written history suggests was occupied first.)*

People were living on the mountain first.  
The Hasasna are from Saudi.  
*Where did he worship?*  
The mosque of Amr – not me – my grandfather went.

This is the end of the first three stories collected from long term residents of Tarif, but we hope it is just the beginning.

To get a full picture of 'life in the *saffs*', or of Tarif in general, would require dozens of interviews, with men and women, as elderly as possible from as wide an area as possible. It would need professional oral history collectors working with a professional ethnographical team. In addition to the oral collection there should also be a filmed record, with a good camera and lighting. Such a project should be done before the generation that lived in the *bab el-haggar* dies. As Ahmed had told us, and many visitors have noted in the past, some Qurnawi lived a very long time indeed. However, in the relatively short time that I have known the hillside and Tarif communities, very many of the older generation have died taking their stories with them. I would love to think that some organisation, academic or otherwise, will see the value of it, and that this work will be done soon. A few disjointed fragments are not enough, what we need is a large pot-full of memories and images that will then last for ever.

## ABSTRACT

*We have lost the opportunity to further record the lives and properties on the Theban hillsides, but we still have a small window of opportunity to record the history of lives in the Tarif tombs. Tarif is a much overlooked part of the whole Theban cemetery complex, and now has a large population, some of whom can still share their own stories of life in the bab el-haggar, and recount stories from the past. This article, with its three short interviews, is a tiny start of a project which should be done by oral history professionals, but I hope that it will encourage some to continue the work.*